bittersweet between my teeth

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by hart

Summary

“Still no better singer than I am a dancer.”

“I’m tryin’ to teach you,” John says.

All humour dies in Gale’s throat as John begins to move. He changes position, tucking one arm beneath Gale’s neck, and with his other hand he pulls him closer by his waist. With John’s thigh still between his, Gale can feel the contours of his hips against his own. The thin layers of cotton pyjamas separating them are not enough.

“Then just sway a bit. Like this.”

Notes

i did not expect this to happen after writing one simple blowjob fic. not wholly necessary to read part one, but would definitely help.

See the end of the work for more notes

Gale turns up at John's place, late in the evening and two weeks before the wedding, and asks him to teach him how to dance. John opens the door, looking surprised and vaguely wan, and lets him in.

"Come all this way just for that?" he says.

He's sporting the tell-tale signs of a hangover. Glass of water by the sink. Glass of liquor on the kitchen counter. It's been months since Gale's seen him. They'd made it back to America, gone their separate ways, and Gale hadn't known how to make contact. They'd seen each other once in between, shortly after the end of the war, and not once more since. A wall had gone up, only emphasised by the states stretching out between them.

Gale supposes he's trying to fix that. John is still meant to be his best man.

"Came all this way," Gale says. "Marge is at her folks. Resting, before… this alright?"

"A heads up would've been nice." John looks at him, and Gale sees the shadows under his eyes. Still, his expression softens. "'Course it's alright." He nods at Gale's bag, stuffed full and still clasped in his hand. "I'll set up the couch."

John's house is bigger than Gale expected. It was his grandfather's, John offers up, with no further information. Gale doesn't press him on it. The kitchen has been redone recently, checkered linoleum floors over half, giving way to pale floorboards, and duck egg blue cabinets. The couch Gale will be sleeping on is older; worn in the centre and hideously patterned, but comfortable. Lived in. He tries to imagine John relaxing on it, and finds it difficult to conjure the image of John relaxing at all. He's flitting around the kitchen, smoking indoors, hands clenching around nothing. He's put whisky in his coffee. Gale doesn't mention it.

There's a large stretch of land behind the house. The garden blurs into fields behind, and a lake in the distance. It makes Gale yearn for Wyoming, and twists a sinking feeling into his stomach.

“There’s a telephone in the hall, if you want to call Marge,” he says.

Gale feels his jaw spasm. “It’s fine. She’ll be wanting her peace.”

“Right,” John says. He stops his fidgeting, turning to look at Gale, who is standing slightly awkwardly next to the kitchen table. “Woulda thought you’d want to cosy up, you know. Before the wedding.”

“She, uh. She thought I oughtta spend some time with my best man. Not seen him for a while.”

“Yeah,” John says. A small smile tugs at the corner of his mouth, not entirely sweet. “Well he didn’t write me. Or call. You not got a phone on your farm?”

“Ain’t a farm, Bucky. Just got a corral.” He takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry. Guess I thought you might want some space.”

“What gave you that idea?”

Gale chews his lip. “You didn’t write, either.”

John looks at him for a long minute. His curls have grown out some, falling over his brow in loose, dark spirals. He’s gained back some of the weight lost in the stalag, but not all of it. Gale knows he looks similarly hollowed. He’s been avoiding mirrors, shaving as often as he can bear to be faced with his own reflection. He’d thought, at first, that stubble could shield his scars from view, but he’s too blond, and the hair only ceased to grow over the thin, pink lines. He’s carrying the war on his face, forever. John had escaped relatively unmarred, but Gale can still see it in his face, too. Gale feels, often, like more scar tissue than human being. He knows that John is the same.

Gale feels nauseous. He’d wanted so badly to see John again. Had been overthinking it something vicious, and with John in front of him now, he’s starting to wonder if he was right to. If something they shared had been left behind in Germany, trampled by those marches and severed when Gale went over that wall without him.

John sighs. He looks up at the ceiling, inhaling deep, and when he exhales it’s like all the tension leaves his body. His shoulders slump, and he looks at Gale with a grin that Gale has missed like an unsalvageable limb. He crosses the distance between them in two big strides, and wraps his arms around Gale’s shoulders, pulling him to his body in a tight embrace. Gale startles, before hugging him back, allowing himself to breathe in everything that is John, real and alive.

It's brief, but when John pulls away he doesn't let him go. He cups Gale's face in his big hands, squeezing his cheeks together and planting a dry kiss to the centre of his forehead.

"God, I missed you. You miss me?"

Gale smiles, still captive in John's palms. "Like a stone in my shoe," he says, a little hoarse, and John slaps his cheek lightly, before finally letting him go.

A night later and three years ago simultaneously, Gale is on John's couch and flying. He's flying with John, which doesn't seem right. It seems like a slip up, to have two majors in one fort. Gale wonders who's leading the others in the planes behind them, but when he looks out the side of the cockpit window, the skies are empty except for them. He asks John where the others are, but John stays silent. His yoke jams, and he tells John to compensate, but John does nothing, only looking straight ahead. There's flak cutting through the air, through their wings, and Gale can't get any of the controls to work, and John does nothing. The bail out switch won't move, and John won't move. Gale goes to shake him. He needs him to say something. He reaches over to pull the mask down from John's face, as if maybe Gale just can't hear him, and when he wrenches the thing down he sees why John isn't talking. The bottom half of his jaw comes away with his mask. Gale freezes. He's holding the mask in his gloved hand, John's bones and tongue stuck to the inside, and John finally looks at him, lone top lip curling over the remaining row of bloodied teeth, like he's trying to say something. John's neck is a mess; bits of bone like crushed piano keys and strings of tissue hanging in red, fleshy mockeries of drooping willow branchlets. Gale can see all the way into the back of his open throat.

"Buck," he says. Gale doesn't understand how he's making noise. "*Buck*."

Gale's awake, and vomiting onto John's living room floor before he knows it. "Bucky-"

"Woah, there," John says, a hand between Gale's shoulder blades.

Gale's shaking all over, one foot still in the sky, coughing up bile and eyes watering. He looks up at John, reaches out to touch his bottom lip without thinking, just to feel that it's really there, connected to the rest of him and twisted in concern. He catches his breath unsteadily, almost too panicked to feel any shame, but not quite.

"Jesus, Bucky, I'm sorry. God, I'm so sorry. Let me-"

John puts his hand on Gale's chest. "Hey, it's fine, it's alright. You gonna hurl again?" Gale breathes deep through his nose. Considers. Shakes his head. "Okay. You get up alright?"

Gale's face flushes. "Yes," he says sharply. Then, softer, "Yeah. Sorry."

John studies his face for a moment. Gale looks away, exposed. "Okay. Go get some air. I'll be out in a minute."

"Let me-" Gale tries again, but John shoots him a stern look.

"Now that's an order, Buck. Take a cigarette."

"I don't-"

"Trust me."

Gale hesitates, before taking the offered pack of smokes, crumpled from John's pocket. He gets to his feet, and walks on jelly legs into John's garden.

The cigarette makes him feel dizzy, but the smoke seems to settle the lingering nausea in his stomach. Gale wonders how many John goes through a week. He looks up at the sky. He's not sure what time it is; the palest light beginning to wash away the stars, no birds singing yet. Still. Silent. He sits down on the dewy grass, knotting his fingers into it, digging his nails into the soft earth. He smokes the cigarette down to the end, and by the time John comes out, smelling like disinfectant and flask in hand, Gale's rabbiting heart has mostly quieted. He sits down next to him, offering him the flask, and Gale turns it down with a wave of his hand. He notices, then, that he's still trembling.

"Wasn't sleeping, either," John says. Gale was sleeping, that was the problem, but he isn't about to argue. "You doin' okay?"

Gale winces slightly at the inverse roles. "Fine, Bucky."

John gives him a lingering look, but lets the topic drop. He lights his

own cigarette, alternating long drags and long drinks from his flask.

“You know you can’t pull rank on me, don’t you?” Gale says eventually. John turns to look at him with a frown. “You ordered me out. Y’can’t do that.”

John barks out a laugh. “Yeah, I can. You’re in my house. I can make you do whatever I want.”

“You sure about that?”

“I’m gonna make you cook us breakfast in a few hours. Seeing as you just wasted the dinner I went to so much effort making.”

“I ain’t your housewife, Bucky, I’m your house guest.”

“Not my housewife with your mug,” John says. Gale feels a twist of something in his chest, like a screw tightening minutely. He looks down at his knees, resisting the urge to touch the lines on his face. “Hey, Buck, I’m kidding.”

“I know,” Gale says. He sighs, looking back at John with a small shrug.

“You’re still gonna be a devil in your wedding photos,” says John. Gale feels that screw tighten a hair further. “Marge is a lucky lady.” Gale stays quiet for a beat, looking up at the sky. It’s getting slowly lighter, and rapidly warmer. Baseless and offhanded, apropos of nothing, John then says, “Do you remember that night in Texas?”

Gale’s breath catches. He clears his throat. “What night?”

“Buck,” John says.

Gale looks at him. His eyes have gone that deep ocean shade, and Gale suppresses a shiver. “I remember.”

“You ever do it?”

Gale feels his ears begin to burn. “Yeah, I did it.”

“Shit, really?” John says. He sits up straighter on the grass, angling his body towards Gale and beaming boyishly. Like it’s gossip. Like the truth of it isn’t so queer. “Well, go on. How’d it go?”

“I’m not kissin’ and tellin’,” says Gale.

“Oh, come on. I’m taking credit, here, Buck, you owe me a rundown.”

“I don’t,” Gale says. “And you can’t take any credit.”

“Mechanics too different?”

Gale’s heart beats in his fingertips. He wants to be able to joke about it, but it doesn’t feel right. Maybe he’s being a sourpuss, or making too much of it, but it doesn’t feel right to quip about the differences between his tongue on John, and his tongue inside Marge. Truth is, he’d still fumbled for a good while. Nervous and jittery, like he was about to fail a test. He’d got into the swing of it in the end, taken Marge apart with his lips, made her make noises he’d never heard from her before. It had been just like John described it. The act of it was fine enough, but the feeling of her coming undone at the mercy of his mouth was what really did it for Gale. Afterwards, when she’d asked what had come over him, he’d said truthfully that John had told him to try it. She’d laughed, claimed to want to know no more, and thanked an absent John like he’d been there in person, urging Gale on. At the time, Gale had wished, bizarrely, that he was. Gale hadn’t done it again.

“Something like that,” he says quietly.

John’s edged closer to him without Gale noticing. The side of his palm is pressed up against Gale’s, their knees knocking together.

“Sorry,” John says. Doesn’t move back. “Being intrusive.”

“’S’alright,” Gale says.

John’s tongue darts out to wet his bottom lip. Gale watches it go. Watches as John brings his cigarette back to his mouth, inhaling deep, turning his head to exhale away from Gale’s face. It’s no longer the height of summer, but Gale can feel the phantom tickle of sweat down his back, his throat tight and sticky-feeling around the air trying to escape him. He swallows. John silently brings the cigarette up to Gale’s mouth, allowing him the dregs of it, and Gale makes no attempt to take it from his fingers as he closes his lips around the end. John pulls it back, and Gale breathes out smoke, watching it follow the movement of John’s hand. The nicotine hits Gale’s bloodstream, his head spinning with it. He blinks forcefully against the dizziness.

“Buck,” John says. He’s so close Gale can feel his breath on his face.

“Showering,” Gale announces gruffly, standing so abruptly he wobbles

on his feet.

He makes it into the house, and into the shower, before he knows if John replies. He's achingly hard, making quick work of himself under the too-hot spray, thrusting into his fist and biting down on the crook of his arm to keep quiet. There's a lump in his throat the whole time. He thinks of Marge, legs spread and soaked for him, whimpering so softly, and so sweetly. He imagines dipping his fingers into her wetness, crooking them just so, in tandem with his tongue pressed flat, then teasing over the part of her that makes her moan. Heat builds in Gale's groin. He grips his cock tighter, breath coming in shallow gasps, and thinks of her fingers in his hair. Her long nails scratching his scalp, as his tongue presses further inside her, alongside his delving fingers. He imagines longer, bigger fingers holding his head still. Knees numb on hot ground. A thumb in his mouth, *prettiest damn thing I've ever seen*, and Gale comes over his hand with a bitten-off groan.

He finishes showering on shaky legs. Brushes his teeth on autopilot, blissful blankness pushing out the guilt that threatens to drown him.

When he leaves the bathroom, he's stopped by a sound coming from behind John's bedroom door. Half-muffled moans, and the sound of skin on skin, bed creaking. Gale tiptoes downstairs, and begins to make coffee for the two of them.

Gale falls into a blessedly dreamless sleep midmorning, and when he wakes John tells him he's been down to the market. Thought Gale might have liked to come, but that it was better to let him sleep. He'd bought some fresh bread and meat. The sky's clear, no clouds to shield the warmth of the sun, and at John's behest they go down to the lake, sandwiches in hand. They sit on the grass beside the water. John kicks his shoes and socks off, dipping his toes in, and Gale copies him.

He looks at John's legs, trousers rolled up to his knees. One of them bears a tiny bruise. His calves, though still just a touch too thin, are defined and muscular in a way that Gale has never quite been. Pale skin masked by dark hair, where Gale is tanned, and his body hair is so fair that after the summer months it's barely visible. He's never

been intimidated by the way John is overtly masculine; so undeniably a real man from the slope of his nose to his legs, down to his way of speaking. In this moment, however, it sparks a hot feeling in his chest, uncomfortable and itching. He looks back up to John's face. John is entirely focussed on his sandwich.

"You got-" Gale starts. Waves his hand in front of his own mouth.

John frowns at him. "Hm?"

"You got flour."

John swats at his upper lip for a moment, dislodging a few white flecks, missing most of it. "I get it?"

"No," Gale says.

"Help me out, then."

Gale taps his own upper lip, and John mimics it, missing again. Gale shakes his head. "No. There."

"Christ's sake," John says, grabbing Gale's wrist and pulling his hand toward his face. Gale tugs back against his grip instinctively, before reaching out with hesitant fingers and swiping the flour from John's moustache. He brushes John's lips as he does it. Feels, for a brief moment, how the centre of them is plump and soft, before giving way to slightly chapped, bitten edges. He pulls his hand back after what feels like a beat too long. Tries not to wonder if John's grip is what holds him there, or his own awful greed. "You get it?"

Gale clears his throat. Looks quickly, then looks away. "Yup."

They eat in silence. John finishes his sandwich, but Gale can't get his down properly. It feels thick and heavy. Tasteless. Ashy. His heart is beating too fast in his throat, making it impossible to swallow. It's a strange and familiar feeling. He's spent the last twelve months ravenous, metabolism recovering from being starved in the stalag, but half the times he goes to eat he finds himself without appetite. As if he's already full of something else. Like he's forgotten how to be fuelled by warm meals, Marge's homely cooking and the things he enjoyed before the war. Some days Gale feels as though he's feeding on nothing but the weight of the last few years.

He puts his sandwich down, tilting his face toward the sun. He lets the heat wash over him, feeling the gentle breeze in his hair and the flow

of the water between his toes. A fly buzzing near his left ear. Gale hears the lid of John's flask open beside him, and he tries his best not to think too much.

"You never told me what happened," John says. Gale cracks one eye open. Glances at John with a questioning look. "The scars. You get 'em going down?"

Gale's gut plummets, and he makes a non-committal noise. "Mm-hm."

John nods. Gale feels like he's looking straight through him. "Not told me much, Buck."

Gale doesn't think he wants to have this conversation. Didn't think John would want it, either. The war stays buttoned beneath their shirts, under their ribs. Hard and frostbitten. Gale can feel it in every room, trying to make itself heard. He tries to talk over it every day, but he's never been loud like John can be. He'd kind of been relying on that.

"What's to tell?" he says, voice tight but steady. "Fighters hit us, wing damn near came off. Just got shot down. Ain't worth telling."

John waves his hand dismissively. Gale squints at him against the glare of the sun, and thinks he can see the doubt in his face. It's fast replaced by a blank stare, and a small wince against the burn of his next sip. The combination fills Gale with dread. He closes his eyes against a sudden ringing in his ears, the sensation of falling in a dizzying spiral, the days before the camp pressing down on his chest. He thinks of John, smiling from the other side of the fence, black and blue and bleeding and breathing and there, alive, with him.

He doesn't want to know. He does not want to know.

"Thought I was gonna scar," John says. "Got lucky, I guess."

"You don't gotta get into it, Bucky."

"Mm. Sure," John says. He drinks from his flask again. Gale feels on the edge of a drop, unable to move and tangled in silk. "Nearly got away twice. Some poor bastard, he could've, too, but he started praying. As if that was gonna do him any good. I told him, *shush,* but I guess he was already halfway to the other side, 'cos he wasn't hearing me. Didn't even shoot him. They were gonna bury us, had these shovels, and just-" he makes a motion with his arms, sandwich still in hand, like swinging a baseball bat. "*Whoosh*. Smashed his face in. I tell

you, Buck, I never tasted anything so disgusting in all my life. You think powdered eggs were bad, you got no idea. Poor bastard."

Gale can't speak. He stares; watches as John goes through it all so casually, voice level and light, like it happened to someone else. Only he's shaking all over. His flask clacks against his teeth as he brings it to his lips. Whisky spills over his trembling fingers as he pulls it back down. John takes a deep breath. Exhales harshly.

"John," Gale says. He's got nothing else of use to say.

John looks out at the water in front of them. "Your fault, anyway."

Gale's stomach lurches. "What?"

John turns to him with a smile. "You had my lucky deuce."

Gale opens his mouth. Shuts it again. John's kidding, he knows he is, but there's something cruel in the raw openness of his voice, and in the way his smile splits into something sharp, canines on show. He knows John is a good pilot. The best, if anyone asks Gale. He knows, too, that he's reckless. Wild at the best of times, and a slave to his moods at the worst. He remembers in the days after his crash, bruised and bone-weary, blood in his teeth and two fingers aching in a way that told him they'd never be right again, thinking of John. Thinking *please, don't do something stupid.* Guilt splits Gale open again and again.

"Come on," John says. "Let's go into town."

John drives them to the bar, windows down and half drunk already. Gale stays quiet, letting the bad feeling fester and churn. John is agitated. Tapping restlessly on the steering wheel, smoking out the window, eyes fixed on the road in mock concentration. The laboured growling of the Ford's engine as John drags the thing too fast round every corner betrays any illusion of sensible driving, and Gale knows that John's barely seeing the road, only the destination. When they reach it in one piece, Gale only has a moment to breathe before fresh anxiety creeps in.

John holds up two fingers to the bartender. Takes the first whisky like a shot, and pulls Gale down onto a bar stool to sip his second. Gale gets a water. He can't stop thinking about the smell of blood, how it must have tasted, and the idea of anything sweet sets his stomach rolling.

"Don't fancy one?" John says, nodding toward his glass.

"Y'know I don't, Bucky." Gale is tired. A headache is pinching the nerves between his eyes.

John makes a kind of tutting sound, disappointed and unimpressed, and Gale thinks he's boring him. He tries not to take it too personally. There had been times at Thorpe Abbotts where he could tell John wished he could pressure him into letting loose. Times when they'd lost more men than they could have expected. After Algeria, John had slipped a shot into Gale's ginger beer. Gale had watched him do it. He'd wanted to be angry at first, but he thinks he understood. John barrelling toward despair like a gear-up landing, just wanting to feel less alone when he hit the bottom. Gale had pretended not to notice it. Had suppressed any grimace at the obvious taste of it. He had gone to bed feeling sick, and John had gone to bed looking just a fraction lighter.

John looks heavy now. There's a dark look in his eyes that's making Gale nervous. It isn't long before trouble starts.

The bar is crowded. It's evening, and a Friday, and the late season sun has everyone in a heightened mood. Gale watches, pained, as several people bump innocently against their shoulders, each time John's expression becoming harder. A bowstring gaining too much tension, waiting to snap. In the end, it's a blond man, tall and thin, with small, circular glasses and a severe angle to his cheekbones, that sets John off like a gunshot. He doesn't even touch John. He stumbles into Gale, a sharp elbow landing in the centre of his back and propelling him forward, spilling the remains of his water over the bar.

He doesn't apologise. Instead, he says, "Watch it," as if Gale's the one who tripped over him, and it's all John needs.

"The fuck did you say?"

"Bucky, leave it," Gale says, futile and falling upon deaf ears.

"I said your pal should watch it, buddy," the stranger says.

Gale wants to shrink into himself. Trapped between two angry people, invisible to both, and yet somehow it's his fault.

"He didn't do anything," says John, rising to his feet along with the volume of his voice.

"He doesn't speak for himself?"

Gale opens his mouth to do just that, but John's already stepped around him and grasped the collar of the stranger's shirt.

"He doesn't fucking have to, *buddy*," John snarls.

Gale has no idea what that means. Doesn't have time to wonder, because John's rearing his fist back and slamming it into the man's face, knocking his little round glasses to the floor. He treads on them, breaking them. Gale can't tell if it's deliberate.

The stranger recovers fast, grabbing John's wrist and twisting himself out from the grip on his collar. He gets in a swift punch to John's jaw before Gale is able to pull John away.

"The *hell* are you doing? Huh?" his own voice is foreign in his ears, harsh and loud in a way he hasn't had to be since commanding a mission. He drags John outside, a cacophony of complaints following them out the door and into an alley. He shoves him roughly back against a wall, John still breathless and rabid. "What's this about? Why you actin' like this?"

"He fucking pushed you."

"It's a bar, Bucky, people get pushed." Gale's own breathing is heavy, hands shaking and rage squeezing his pulse into a thunderous rhythm.

"He was a prick about it!"

"You my guard dog?" Gale says, and John- John *woofs*. Gale has to pinch the bridge of his nose to keep the anger from bursting forward, feeling it frothing under his skin like a gasket ready to blow. "Goddamn child. That wasn't anythin' to do with me, you know it. You're upset, I can see that, but that don't mean you gotta go picking fights for the sake of it. Jesus."

John glares. He leans back against the wall, lighting a cigarette, and Gale watches his jaw clench and unclench as he smokes in stony

silence. Gale runs a hand through his hair. He wishes he was home.

When John speaks next, his voice is cold. “You don’t get upset, do you, Buck.”

Gale groans. “I do, Bucky,” he says tiredly. “I get upset. Just keep it in, is all.”

“All in there,” John says, tapping his own brow with his fingers.

“Sure,” Gale sighs. “I’ll drive. You’re drunk.”

“Mm-hm. It’s in there alright,” John says. Then, so fast Gale doesn’t see it coming, he uses the heel of his palm to hit the point he was tapping. Gale flinches. “All of it, it’s all fucking in here.”

He hits himself again.

Gale is frozen, as John repeatedly slams his own hand into his forehead, dropping his cigarette in the process. Each hit is harder than the last, and Gale is stunned. He feels queasy, like his entire soul has fallen from his stomach and into the centre of the Earth.

It’s only when John goes to hit himself for the fourth time that Gale realises he can move, and he takes both of John’s wrists in his hands, fighting against his strength until John finally submits. He slumps forward, burying his face into Gale’s chest. Gale wonders if he can hear how fiercely his heart is beating. John thumps his fist against him weakly.

“It’s always gonna be there,” he says, voice muffled by Gale’s button-down and thick with drink and hurt.

Gale is still shocked. He tries to steady his own breathing, to comprehend what’s just taken place.

“I know,” he says uselessly. “I know.”

They don’t talk about it after. Gale doesn’t bring it up, and John seems to be content pretending it never happened. The only signs that it did

are John's lowered intake of alcohol, which Gale is grateful for, and a faint bruise above John's left eyebrow, which Gale tries hard to avoid looking at.

The following days pass in relative normalcy. It reminds Gale, a little, of being back in basic. The summer presses on in its determined final efforts. It doesn't get nearly as hot as Texas, but Gale can almost imagine he's back there when he's in John's garden, a cold drink and the steadily warming pages of his book in his hands. John's coffee goes whiskyless for a couple of mornings. The war crawls back in between Gale's ribs, and sleeps.

John does not sleep. Gale can hear him moving around upstairs late at night. He politely ignores it, doesn't mention it, until John tiptoes downstairs mid-week and shoves Gale's legs up the couch.

"I know you're awake," he whispers, even though it's just them there.

"Am now," Gale mumbles.

John settles onto the opposite end of the couch, kicking Gale's side in the process. He stays still for a moment, before shifting again. His left foot shoves into Gale's right armpit, and Gale huffs, opening his eyes and sitting.

John looks wrecked. There are deep shadows beneath his eyes, which shine with something frightened and faraway. Gale knows these nights himself as well as he knows the controls of a fort.

"This ain't a two person couch," he says. John looks dejected, and Gale's chest twinges. He swallows, standing and dragging John to his feet. "C'mon, then."

They'd shared a bunk in the camp. All of them had shared as it got so cold that it practically meant death not to. Still, Gale is stiff when John leads them to his bed, getting in after him and lying flat on his back. He counts the cracks on the ceiling. Six; three sprawling out like spiders' legs from one larger, blacker split. Two smaller wiry cracks in opposite corners of the room. He counts every breath he takes. They prove harder to keep track of.

"Jesus, Buck. You like this with Marge?"

Gale blushes. It's a strange comparison to make. Marge doesn't need his body heat, or the presence of his understanding.

"How d'you want me to be?"

John says nothing. Gale jumps slightly as his hand touches his hip, pulling him over so he's lying on his side to face him. John's bed is not big. He nudges Gale's knee with his own, slots a leg between Gale's thighs, doesn't let go of his hip. Gale feels like he's forgotten how to move of his own volition.

"Touch of an angel," John says sarcastically.

Gale doesn't know what John is doing. They don't need to touch. He's here for one reason: so that John can sleep with the knowledge that Gale's here to wake him, if he needs to. A year out of the fight, and months of distance between them, it even borders on strange to be here for that.

"Should get a woman," Gale says, strained.

John hums. He brings Gale closer, hand moving from his hipbone to rest between their chests, and Gale relaxes just a little at the broken contact.

"Not got much of that."

"No women in Manitowoc?" Gale asks, and John shrugs against the sheets.

"No good at it, really," John says. Gale frowns. John was known around base for a different dame on his arm every week- had been called up multiple times on not returning to the barracks, or for bringing a woman back to them. "Don't know if any would have me now."

Gale twitches. An unpleasant memory pushes at the front of his skull. John pacing and despondent, eyeing the fence as Gale told him that he was worth knowing. That he would be worth knowing. It stirs something cold in Gale's gut. "That's not true."

"Tsk," John hisses. "You're lucky you got your sweetheart before you shipped off. Before we got all turned around."

Gale doesn't know how to respond. He takes a deep breath, and for some reason it's a struggle to exhale. "You're out of practice."

"Maybe," John says. His eyes are shut. He doesn't look much older than he did the last time they'd met, but Gale can see the lines of

stress creasing between his brows. He's got a smattering of freckles across his nose, and his long lashes cast shadows over the apples of his cheeks. Gale finds it hard to believe any woman wouldn't want him, with or without the war in tow. John opens his eyes, and Gale quickly looks away. "You really can't dance?"

Gale blinks. "You know I can't."

"No," says John pointedly. "I know you *don't*. But you're really no good at it?"

"None," Gale says honestly. "Don't know my foot from my elbow."

John laughs, genuine and loud in the quiet room, and Gale wants to make him do it again. "It's easy. You just gotta go with the flow."

"Haven't got any flow in me, Bucky."

"Look," John says. He slings an arm over Gale's shoulder. "Just gotta put your arms 'round her, like this."

Gale's mouth goes dry.

"Uh-huh," he says. John starts humming disjointedly, and Gale recognises it after a moment as Ray Noble. He smirks despite himself. "Still no better singer than I am a dancer."

"I'm tryin' to teach you," John says.

All humour dies in Gale's throat as John begins to move. He changes position, tucking one arm beneath Gale's neck, and with his other hand he pulls him closer by his waist. With John's thigh still between his, Gale can feel the contours of his hips against his own. The thin layers of cotton pyjamas separating them are not enough.

"Then just sway a bit. Like this."

John resumes his off-key humming, and begins to move against Gale. It's awkward lying down and facing each other. Less like swaying and more like John is just rubbing against him. It's gentle enough that Gale truly can't tell if John believes this is just dance practice. Gale can't tell what it is. Only that John's thigh keeps a constant pressure against him, and Gale can feel the beginnings of panic building, alongside warmth, and need. His lungs are starting to burn with how little he's breathing. John's own breath is hitting his face steadily, like it's nothing at all, like Gale isn't about to shatter into a thousand tiny,

ragged pieces beneath him if he keeps this up. John presses their bodies tighter together, and Gale can't help the gasp that comes out as he feels John's length against his own. They're both half-hard. Gale waits for the ground to open up and take him.

"You really aren't good at this," John says.

"Bucky," Gale croaks out. His head is spinning. John knows. He *knows*. He can feel it, like Gale can feel it against his own loathsome arousal.

John carries on like nothing is out of the ordinary. "You're not even moving," he chastises.

Gale can't. He can't participate. He's being flayed and laid bare, all his clandestine wants being made woefully obvious by his body's betrayal. He feels insane. John is making him feel insane with this bizarre act of some horizontal dance rehearsal. He hears John's voice, years away, *try it with me*, and he wants to disappear as John's hand on his waist creeps lower, grips the curve of his ass, pulls Gale as close as they can get, and Gale chokes on a moan. His cock is against John's, pressing and then slotting side by side as John grinds against him still. John is at least breathing heavier, but Gale's coming apart at the seams.

"John," he says, voice hoarse and desperate. He puts his hands on John's chest and pushes him away.

The space seems to shake some sense into him. John rests back against the wall, lips parted and panting lightly. Gale stares at him.

"Well," John says. Clears his throat. "'Spose that's not really what you'd do with a nice girl."

Gale's heart hammers against his ribs. He can feel wetness at the tip of his cock, sticking to his pyjamas uncomfortably.

"John," he says again.

"Don't worry about it," John says. "No good lying down, anyway."

Then he rolls over. Turns away from Gale and faces the wall, body deceivingly slack in its posture. Gale watches the back of his head for what feels like an age, until John truly relaxes, and Gale hears the start of soft snores.

Gale rolls onto his back. He clamps his hand over his mouth until it hurts, his fingers trembling at his teeth. He begins to recount the

cracks in the ceiling.

The first thing John says when Gale comes back from town with milk is, “On your feet, Major.”

Gale walks through the door slowly, looking at John with suspicion. He puts the milk down on the kitchen table, and cocks an eyebrow at him. “I’m on my feet.”

John grins. He gestures towards the room with one sweeping arm, *step right in*, and as Gale draws closer he can hear the record playing in the hallway. Something upbeat, jaunty, paired with the sound of John tapping his foot against the floorboards. Gale shuts the door behind him. He feels wary, and for some reason nervous. He cracks a small smile.

“Here?”

“Oh, yes,” says John with glee. “What, you think I was gonna take you to a ballroom? We got all we need right here. Pushed the table back a bit. Floors aren’t too uneven. C’mon. You came here for this, right?”

Gale swallows hard. When he speaks, his voice is sort of strangled. “I did.”

He shrugs off his jacket, taking longer than necessary to fold it over the back of a chair. John’s clearly excited. He’s hopping from foot to foot, already moving to the music, arms extended. Gale breathes deeply through his nose, and out through his mouth.

They’ve made no attempt to address the other evening. John had slept soundly and Gale not at all, and in the morning neither of them said a word about it. The laundry list of things they do not talk about seems to be growing, and Gale can feel it starting to throttle him. John seems unbothered by it. By any of it. It’s making Gale feel like a lunatic, as if he’s fabricating things in his head. Something dangerous and thick is building in the air between them, and John is either better at pretending it isn’t, or is completely unaware. Gale hopes to God it’s the former. If it’s all in his head, one-sided and predatory, it only

serves to make him loathe himself more. He doesn't entirely remember why he came here.

He steps towards John slowly, unsurely, and without hesitation John curves one arm around his waist.

"My wedding gift to the both of you," he says, and then he starts dancing.

He manoeuvres Gale like he's made of clay, clumsy and brainless. Like Frankenstein's monster. Gale's left arm automatically moves to John's shoulder, and John takes his free hand, entwining their fingers. He extends their linked arms, keeping Gale close with the hand upon his back. Not too close. There's space between them, loose and casual, and John starts to step from side to side with a light-hearted ease that allows Gale to gather his thoughts. It's like a sport. Like dancing with Meatball, if Meatball were a better dancer than himself. Like a friend teaching a friend.

John pulls them back and forth a few times, letting Gale find the beat of the music. It doesn't do him much good. He's looking down at his feet where they're skittling inelegantly, concentrating so hard on not stepping on John's toes that he forgets about the rest of his body.

"Don't look down, look at me," John says.

When Gale looks up, he's relieved to see John's expression open. Neutral. He breathes out, focussing on staying upright.

"Alright?"

"No, Buck, not alright. You're like a board. C'mon, stop worrying about your shoes."

"I'm gonna break an ankle," Gale says, and as he does so he catches the edge of John's boot with his toe, tripping. John catches him quickly, tightening his hold on Gale's waist and righting him like he weighs nothing.

"Y'thinking too hard. Just gotta let it be natural."

Gale glares. "I'm *tryin'*."

"You gonna snap at Marge when you tread on her toes, too?" John laughs. "Just listen. Follow my lead."

Gale clenches his jaw, frustration becoming his main driver. He does as he's told, tuning his brain to the ebbing and flowing of the record. He lets John move them in wider sweeps across the kitchen, his palm becoming sweaty in the grasp of his hand, but John makes no comment on it. He starts to hum along to the tune, and Gale tries to copy his steps. Forward, then back, John's movements a practiced and smooth contrast to Gale's jerky faltering. Forward, and then back, Gale follows him. Forward, and then back, the anchor of John's big hand on his waist becoming a cushion for every misstep, pushing him in the right directions so gently Gale could almost believe he was doing it himself on pure instinct. His grip on John's shoulder loosens until he's lightly resting his fingers next to his collar.

"That's it! Now go the other way."

"What?" Gale says, but John just flings them apart as the music swells.

He keeps his fingers locked with Gale's, stepping sideways until there's as much distance between them as can be without letting go. Then he pulls him in, and Gale can't stop the way he spins with the force of it, coming to a stop when John's hand returns to the small of his back.

"Okay, now like you're expecting it."

"Bucky-" Gale starts, but John just grins as he separates them again.

Gale thinks fast, mirroring the way John does a small kick to one side, laughing as he lets himself be dragged back in, spinning with more intent and more coordination. John releases his hand, and this time he keeps the one present on Gale's body. The drums of the song intensify alongside the brass, playful and loud, and they dance side by side, not face to face. Gale moves his hand down to John's lower back, following the directions of his shuffling, almost skipping with their arms around each other.

Gale feels weightless, for a moment. The music continues to grow, and he moves less like a cadaver and more like a person as John leads him around the kitchen. The record skips. Once, twice, then resumes. Gale feels, strangely, like his heart skips with it. He swallows the feeling down. John spins him again as the music heightens once more, and he's suddenly dizzy. He stumbles. Picks himself back up. Blinks hard.

John looks at him, a small frown on his face. "You okay?"

Gale smiles tightly. "Mm-hm."

The music doesn't seem to slow. He tries to dance along to it, but when it hits its bursting crescendo it makes him jump. It's just a song. It's only a song, but icy panic has begun to coil in his chest, squeezing the air out of his lungs, and the more he tries to push it down the more it pushes back up, leaving his body in short, sharp punches.

John, blind to Gale slipping elsewhere, says "Going down?" and Gale is sure that he is, although he can't figure out why.

John dips him. Gale goes with him, curving backwards over the solid bracket of his strong forearm, the tune reaching its triumphant conclusion, and he's overcome with the sudden image of his wedding day. Marge dancing with him and lowering him in one graceful swoop, as if he were the bride, and then Gale-

Gale keeps falling.

He scrunches his face up hard against the sensation, but it doesn't stop. He opens his eyes, everything too bright, and he feels himself fall straight through John's rickety flooring. There is air on him, ice cold, rushing in his ears and deafening him. His fingers won't work to pull his chute. Something touches his face- burning flak and shards of his fort, screaming hot metal breaking up around him, the sharp tip of a dirty blade. John's hands. John's warm hands cupping his cheeks. They startle Gale into the kitchen, and he jerks away from them, his spine connecting hard with the cabinet behind him.

The music has stopped.

John comes into focus, hands held up in surrender. His features are pinched with worry.

"Buck," he says, softer than Gale has ever heard him. "You're alright."

Gale nods reflexively. He doesn't feel alright. He thinks he might be having a heart attack.

"I-" he starts, but nothing else comes to him.

"You're in my house," John says.

"I know where I fuckin' am," Gale grits out, too harshly.

John nods. If he's offended he doesn't show it. "Just try to breathe."

Gale does. It's almost impossible to begin with. His throat won't let

any air in, closed up around the effort of surviving, and he hates the way he sounds as he drags in a jagged, painful gasp. John does him the service of not hovering. He stands, disappearing from Gale's narrow line of sight. Gale presses both of his shaking hands to his sternum, as if he can reach into his chest and get his lungs to work just by probing them, reminding them that they're still in there. That they are a part of his body, and supposed to work with the rest of him, not against him.

Gale doesn't know why this keeps happening. It's been long enough. Marge had been so kind when it happened at home. On nights where Gale would wake choking, or days where he would blink and be back in the stalag, too far away to get through to, and too frozen to speak for hours. That had been the first few months. After a while, Gale became less hopeful that peacetime would reach him. He learned to hold the war inside of himself; better to carry it alone than continue to infect Marge. It had worked alright in Wyoming. But here, with John, Gale can feel it start to slip through the cracks. A latent disease slowly weakening him, degrading his cells and causing him to decompose from the inside out. He had contained it for a year, let it take root for three before that, lived with it growing inside him like a parasite and turned up and pulled rank each morning either way.

Gale wonders if John's as sick as he is.

He is tidying the kitchen, Gale realises. John's legs come back into view. Gale hears the tap running. Dishes in the sink bumping together. He listens with his eyes forward until the muted sounds of china clinking in water become just water, sloshing, then draining. A lighter is sparked. Gale can smell the smoke, unmistakably tobacco, so much safer than the acrid stench of burning oil and rubber. John is giving him privacy without deserting him altogether.

Gale trembles, and hates himself.

He raises his eyes. Looks at John to make sure that he is still there. In Manitowoc, in his kitchen. He made it out. John made it out, in spite of Gale.

John watches him wordlessly. Gale shakes his head a little, *can't move yet*, and John nods once, *alright*. He sits down on a chair to the left of Gale, and Gale listens to the clock tick on the wall. The sound of John's cigarette being smoked down to the end. Then John stands, and Gale's heart leaps to his throat as he leaves the room, but he only goes as far as the hall. He turns the record over, volume down low,

and walks back to Gale with an arm outstretched.

“Up,” he says. Gale considers, then takes his hand. John pulls him to his feet. “Somethin’ slower, huh?”

He wraps both his arms around him. He sways them lightly, barely a dance at all, and Gale buries his face in his shoulder. He’s a dead weight in John’s embrace, and after a minute of gentle rocking from side to side John brings them to a stop in the centre of the kitchen. He doesn’t let Gale go.

Gale is exhausted suddenly. Wrung out and pathetic, reduced to a shivering nothing held up by a man he left to die. His useless lungs give out again, and before long he’s panting into the crook of John’s neck.

“Shh,” he whispers. “’S’alright, Buck.”

Gale makes a noise, a dying thing, and like comforting a dying thing John cradles the back of his head, stroking his hair. The record scratches as it spins. Gale feels himself rot.

‘Ain’t never been a quitter’ was something that had followed Gale around at one point in time.

Gale started basic quiet, but not shy. He’d been a shy child. Cripplingly so. He’d found it so difficult to make friends as a boy that he had given up trying after he’d made a good two. That had been enough for Gale. He, Francis, and Ted had been a solid trio until they’d gone their separate ways. Francis had joined the Marines, and Ted, who had one leg due to an accident on his father’s farm, had gone on to be a teacher. Gale hadn’t heard from either of them again.

By the time Gale started flight school, the concept of making more friends was not something he felt important. John, of course, had other ideas.

He seemed to pick Gale out of an infinitely more interesting line-up of boys on his first day there. He’d swung his arm around Gale’s narrow

shoulders, told him he looked exactly like some boy back home, and had christened him as his own within three hours. Gale had hardly spoken a word to him.

John found it baffling to see Gale awake at twilight, studying the mechanics of the birds they'd be training in, and when John had asked him if he wasn't tired Gale had looked at him, and told him, *"I ain't never been a quitter."*

When Gale had been viciously sick one night, fever ripping through his body and wracking him with violent shakes, John had snuck out of his own bed to find him in one of the barracks' bathrooms. He'd pushed his sweaty hair off his forehead as Gale vomited until he felt hollow. In the morning, pale and greenish, John had raised an eyebrow at the sight of him in his pressed uniform. Standing rod-straight and ready to fly.

"*You good?*" John had whispered.

"*Ain't never been a quitter*," Gale hissed back.

He'd thought it one other time in Texas, down on his knees and the world between his lips.

And when John had been processed at the camp, finally reaching Gale and saying, "*Was gettin' scared you weren't here,"* Gale had let him hold his face, squeezing gently like they were back in the pub in England, like no time at all had passed and no one at all had died. Fingers running over the fresh scars, and Gale had understood that he didn't mean there, in Germany.

"*You know me, Bucky,*" he'd said into the palm of his hand.

"*One Engine Cleven,*" John smiled, all teeth and grief. "*Ain't never been a quitter.*"

So Gale asks to try again, in John's kitchen in Manitowoc. John smiles again. Teeth hidden and colour in his cheeks.

"Alright then, Ginger," he says, holding out his hand.

It takes Gale almost a week to get the hang of it. Dancing with John isn't like dancing with a girl. He's big; broad as anything, and the mere couple of inches he has on Gale feel like miles when he's being spun around in his arms. John points out, several tries in, that Gale is supposed to be learning the lead. From then on it's even more

difficult. John's less of a natural at taking the backseat. Like everything he does, he fights Gale for command each step of the way before he remembers he's meant to catching, not pitching, and even then he's heavy, less coordinated, not quite the excellent teacher he'd promised he could be.

"Alright," John says one evening. He's tipsy, but not drunk, Gale's mediocre cooking lining their stomachs and only two whiskies dizzying his mood. Gale, for some murky, spontaneous reason, has had one as well. He stands determinedly, chair scraping on the floor. "Let's fucking get it right this time."

"Alright," Gale agrees.

John puts on a record, and then they do. They get it right. John relents control quickly, easily, and the buzz of alcohol makes Gale loose, sure of himself in a way he hasn't been since God knows when. It feels completely natural as he holds John by his waist, starting slow and building up to what could only be considered a damn good dance. John spins away from him like his body is waifish, full of air. Gale pulls him back in with complete confidence. He holds him close as they traverse the kitchen, and then they sprawl out into the hallway. John even releases his hold on Gale for a moment, and Gale watches, in awe and laughing, as John tiptoes up the bottom five stairs at the end of the hall. He does a clumsy turn, before flinging himself back down the stairs and into Gale's waiting arms.

"Don't think Marge will be doin' that, Bucky," Gale says, breathless.

"I'll have that one with you, then," John says.

They've ended up closer than they have during any practice before. Both of them are slightly winded. Gale can feel John's breath on his lips, mingling with his own heavy exhales. Gale's arms are around John's shoulders. He's leaning up on the balls of his feet to compensate for their height difference, and suddenly Gale doesn't feel like he's leading anything. He feels like he's impossibly small, John's thick arms wrapped tight around his body. John's fingers are moving in little strokes, tickling his ribs. He looks down to Gale's mouth, and Gale's nerves stir. He watches John's lips in return. Bitten, parted, his tongue darting out to wet them in a brief flick. Neither of them move.

Gale's chest expands rapidly against him. John is breathing just as fast. Gale could kiss him. The realisation slams into him with all the force of a gunshot; an impulsive urge that overwhelms every rational

thought. He could kiss him. His mouth goes bone-dry. His brain feels fuzzy, seasick and hot.

Something clicks, and he drops his arms from John's shoulders, stepping back so quickly he knocks into the record player. The thing makes a dreadful squeal as the needle drags the wrong way against the grooves. John visibly winces at the sound. Gale turns rapidly and fumbles with it, adjusting the needle with uncooperative fingers, but he doesn't know how to get it spinning again without shrieking. Ultimately, he gives up, and puts the needle's arm back onto its rest. There's a stark scratch across the black shellac of the record. Gale stares at it.

"Is it ruined?" John says after a long moment. Gale gnaws on his lip, and nods. "That was my favourite Miller."

Gale keeps staring at it. He can't bring himself to look back at John. He can't even apologise. He blinks spots from behind his eyes, wavering slightly on his feet.

"Think I need to sleep off the, uh," he clears his throat. Takes a deep breath in and straightens his back. Turns to John with what he hopes is an easy smile. More than likely it just comes off unhinged. "Night, John."

John looks at him with a raised eyebrow, but nods, and without another word he leaves Gale be. He returns to the couch in a daze.

Face down in the rough cushions, Gale wants to scream. He's lost track of why he came to John. A stupid idea; a stupid, manipulative move that will surely down their friendship with all the force of a shredded fort. John should kick him out of his house. Send him back to Marge with his tail between his legs. A lame and impotent mutt, with a waning bark and no bite at all. He should leave. It's not right, his being here. John must know, must have figured it all out by now, and Gale should leave in the morning. He should leave *now* .

He digs his nails into the palms of his hands, and knows with a heavy heart and a monstrous certainty that he won't go. Because he does not want to. He does not know when he became so selfish.

“We should go out tonight.”

Gale looks up from where he’s putting away plates. It’s been a day of awkward silences, Gale avoiding John’s eye and John avoiding Gale altogether. Gale fractured something between them the previous evening, he’s sure he did. His feet have itched with the urge to run all day, and yet he’s still here. John has been sipping from his flask since noon. Gale knows what kind of moods to expect from him this evening, and dread settles into that place inside him. The rot swells in his ribcage, shoving everything vital out of the way.

It’s an act of self-flagellation when he says, “Alright.”

John doesn’t drive them to his usual spot. They go deeper into town, and park up outside a dance hall. Gale has never been to a nightclub before. It’s immediately overwhelming. Vast and packed inside, a large dance floor occupying most of the space, with several bars around the edges and a band posted up on a stage at the far end. He loses John to the crowd almost straight away.

“Bucky,” he calls out, watching John’s head pop up over a thrum of people, a drunken smile plastered on his face and something dark and gleaming in his eyes.

“Getting a drink!” John shouts back. “See you on the other side!”

Gale presses his fingers into his temples. He’s bustled from side to side, lost in a sea of bodies and feeling out of his depth, adrift and miserable. The music is far too loud, and the entire room has a miasma of cigarette smoke that makes his eyes water. After several people trip over his feet he drags himself to the side-lines, slumping down on a seat and putting his head in his hands. He’ll be driving John home tonight. He accepts that as his duty, and some ugly, self-pitying part of him accepts it as a punishment, too. Gale resigns himself to a long and painful evening, and an even more painful headache later.

Gale looks up from his palms after a while, and notices a woman watching him. She’s pretty- slender and short with light hair. She reminds him of Marge. Something catches in his throat, and whatever it is it must show on his face. The girl smiles at him, almost apologetically, before turning away. Gale laughs bitterly. It’s written all over him. *Do not approach. There’s something wrong with this one.*

He sighs. The centre of the room has cleared a little, and he spies John dancing. The woman he's with is gorgeous. Tall and blonde, and Gale watches intently as he spins her around easily. Their steps aren't practiced, losing their footing several times when their toes bump together, but they move in such a well-matched flow that it looks like the simplest thing in the world. John lifts her by her narrow waist at one point, and Gale looks away as her skirts flutter upwards when John sets her down. When he looks back at them next, John is looking straight at him.

He grins. He's flushed and sweaty, curls falling loose over his forehead. He takes the girl's hand and twirls her beneath his arm. Mouths, "*Look*," at Gale. "*Watch*."

Gale does. John moves with confidence as he leads the girl step by step. She's clearly a natural, too, following him without even looking, allowing herself to be dropped so low the ends of her hair kiss the floor, before John catches her, picking her back up with grace, like the two of them are in complete symbiosis. Gale can't tear his eyes away. He follows the span of John's fingers, covering her waist almost entirely. One of his hands moves lower, down to her thigh, and strokes back up until his fingertips disappear beneath her dress. If she has any reaction to this, Gale doesn't catch it. John looks directly at him as his hand climbs higher out of view. Gale's heartbeat races. He shouldn't be watching this. He can't stop.

The girl pushes John's roaming touch away, playful and unannoyed, spinning around so that her back is pressed against John's front. John tucks his chin over her shoulder, swaying as his hands come back to rest on her waist, and then her hips, as low as could possibly be considered appropriate out in the open. The girl has her eyes shut. John is still looking at Gale. He whispers something in her ear, and Gale feels a spike of inexplicable, hot anger punch into his chest. He's uncomfortably hard.

Gale can tell that John is, too. He can tell, because the blonde must move back against him just right, and the open-mouthed kiss John is pressing to her neck turns into a slack look of pleasure. He keeps his eye contact with Gale, as he moans against her shoulder.

Gale hates him. He hates him, then, almost as much as he hates himself.

John's large left hand comes up to cradle his partner's face, kissing her lips hungrily. Gale can see his tongue dipping into her painted mouth

even from here, and he's had enough. He gets to his feet, adjusts the front of his pants around his aching cock, and shoves his way out into the fresh air.

He hopes John fucks her right there on the dancefloor, and does not follow him.

Gale barges his way past several drunken couples, the world blurring in front of him, until he finds a quiet, empty spot between buildings. He crouches down against the dirty wall. Breathes in through his nose, out through his mouth. He runs his hands through his hair, pulling until it stings, and then he stands again, restless and jittery. There's a glass bottle by his feet. He kicks it. It rattles away from him, mocking in its quiet skips over loose paving stones. He kicks it again, harder. He squeezes his eyes shut, and behind his eyelids he sees John's face. His tipsy grin, the look he gave Gale in his kitchen, his breath against Gale's lips as he ground his hips down against him in his bed. Gale is worn out. Stretched to the point of breaking by this wordless back and forth; this strange dance he's locked in with John, something that feels like both a sick joke and the end of his world. He knows where it will go from here. John possesses a wild freedom, and Gale possesses an infinite, burning jealousy. John can rename him, touch him like he owns him, get him down on his knees and get him to stay there at his feet, forever, and John can get up and fly above him like it's nothing, because nothing appears to matter to him at all.

Gale opens his eyes, and like his father before him he lets rage move his heavy hands. He picks up the bottle and throws it hard against the wall. It shatters into a hundred little pieces. Some of the glass rebounds, catching him on the side of his face and his outstretched palm. He's surprised to see blood beading up from the torn flesh. He hardly feels human enough to bleed.

"Buck!" John rounds the corner, pink cheeks glistening still. He's looking at Gale like he's crazy.

"Slipped," Gale says gruffly.

"Uh-huh," John says, measured and careful. He approaches him slowly, brows knit together. "You get yourself?"

Gale looks down at the blood on his hands. It's worst down near his wrist, a short but thick gash that's weeping steadily, running in a gory rivulet, staining his sleeve red. "A little."

"Let me see," John says, ignoring Gale's rough *don't*, taking his hand

and turning it to inspect. He hisses. “Jesus. This looks bad, Buck.”

“’S fine.”

“Gale.”

Gale pulls his hand back from John’s grasp. “It’s fine.”

John folds his arms. He looks at Gale, and in that moment he seems completely sober. Like Gale’s the one who’s out of his mind. “What’s going on?”

“Nothin’,” Gale says. He used to be convincing.

“C’mon. Buck. Are you- are you alright? Is this like-”

Gale laughs, harsh and loud, and revels only slightly in the way John startles. He thinks he’s having another moment. Another one of the times where he gets stuck in his head, flung miles across the Atlantic. He could be right. But there’s no fear of sudden enemy fire, no nervous waiting for the anti-aircraft attacks to stop reverberating around his skull. Gale thinks he could hear a shotgun right now, and feel as numb as his bleeding hand.

“Is it Marge?” John says, and that, at least, gives Gale pause. “You afraid she’ll be upset? ’Cos that was just a bit of fun, you weren’t even dancing with anyone.”

“Uh-huh,” Gale says. “Sure, Bucky. A bit of fun watchin’ you act like a two dollar whore.”

“Jesus, Buck. What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothin’,” Gale says, bitter and tired.

“No, let’s have it, go on.”

Don’t make me say it, Gale thinks. He glares at John, leaning back against the wall and pressing his lips firmly together. Tamping down the truth with his tongue. “I’m goin’ tomorrow.”

“Don’t,” John says. Gale puts the side of his hand in his mouth so that he doesn’t respond. His teeth worry at the throbbing cut on his palm. “I can’t read your fucking mind, and to be honest, Buck, I’m kind of tired of having to try.”

“I ain’t never asked you to do that,” Gale says.

“Yeah, because you wouldn’t ask for anything, would you?” John sounds riled up, angry, and Gale thinks *finally. Here it is.* The sour conclusion of their dance, the way he deserves.

“I ask for plenty, John.”

John steps closer to him. Gale wonders if he’ll hit him, or if he might just look at him like he doesn’t know him anymore. “Try it.”

“Go back to your date,” Gale says with venom.

John snorts, face mean. “You didn’t like her, did you?”

“Don’t know her, Bucky,” Gale says. His gut twists. His fingers are tingling, every nerve bundled up and quivering like they’re desperate to escape him.

“Uptight son of a bitch,” John says. His smile is cruel, and his body is inches from Gale’s. “I know why you didn’t like her. ’Cos she was going to let me fuck her in the bathroom back there.”

Gale blushes at the truth he knows is behind those words. He schools his expression into cold indifference. “Better go get on with it, then.”

“And that wouldn’t bother you?”

Gale’s jaw clenches. “That wouldn’t bother me.”

“Right,” John says. “’Cos nothing does.”

“That’s right.”

“Jesus Christ,” John groans. “What do you want, Buck? ’Cos I think I know and I’m sick of this.”

Gale feels the floor drop out from underneath him. He looks down at his feet, sighs shakily, waits for the fist, or for the aching silence.

“You know, John.”

John inhales deeply, and says nothing in response. Gale looks back up to his face, and he can’t read his expression. He looks like he’s trying to solve a problem in his head. Gale knows, already, that it’s unsolvable. There’s only one solution.

He says again, “I’ll be on my way tomorrow.”

“No, you won’t,” John says. “You can’t.”

Gale frowns, opens his mouth to say something, and before he gets the chance to John pushes him up against the wall, and kisses him hard.

Gale freezes. Everything in his head screams to a halt, his world narrowing to the press of John’s lips against his own. Gale doesn’t kiss back at first. He’s immobile, and it’s only when John pulls back, breaks their contact, that something switches in Gale’s brain. He grabs John by the collar, dragging him back in. John smiles against his teeth, and Gale opens up to him, letting John’s tongue in. John’s hand reaches up to tug at Gale’s hair, pulling sharply, and Gale moans.

“John,” he gasps, grappling for thoughts with slippery, panicked hands. “What-”

“You’re so stupid. You didn’t think-,” John grins into his mouth. He tugs his hair again, Gale moans again. “That’s it. I remember.”

Gale soars. The words throb in his mind like a pulse, *I remember*, like Gale isn’t the only one who’s never stopped thinking about that night in Texas. John kisses him deep and vicious, teeth catching and pulling on Gale’s bottom lip before returning to lick into his mouth, dripping with spit and hot and panting. Gale holds John’s face like he’ll never let go. John’s free hand pulls his shirt out from where it’s tucked into his pants, and his touch feels searing on Gale’s ribs. He flattens his palm against his stomach, sliding his fingers into his waistband. He lets go of Gale’s hair but does not break their kiss to make fast work of his belt, his fly, and then he’s grasping Gale’s cock, right there, just off the side of the road.

Gale separates their mouths, says, “John.”

“I owe you,” John says, just as wrecked.

Gale feels his ears go red. “Here?”

“Oh yeah, sweetheart,” John grins.

He kisses Gale again, slower and softer, pressing his thumb into the curve of Gale’s chin and coaxing him open gently. Gale’s chest empties out into it, and he feels every taught string of tension in him snap and dissolve. John holds him by the jaw and kisses him a moment longer before pulling away, smiling, and lowering onto his knees.

He touches Gale through his jeans, torturously soft whilst running his

fingers over the hard shape of his cock. He presses his mouth to the front of Gale's pants, licking obscenely at the rough cotton, and the sight of it makes Gale groan. John looks up at him with a steady gaze, eyes dark, and takes him out. Gale's head falls back against the wall behind as John strokes him a few times. It's immediately apparent that John has done this before. Unlike Gale, he approaches every move with certainty. He drags over the head of his cock, swiping his thumb against the slit and using the slickness there to ease the glide of his hand back down. Gale's already panting harshly.

"You're so gorgeous, Buck," John whispers. "God, I've thought about you like this so many fucking times."

John spits right onto his cock, and Gale has a difficult time processing any of his words. When they hit him, though, they fill him with some feeling so overwhelming he stops breathing for a moment. His hips jerk forward into John's fist, and he stifles an embarrassingly loud moan.

"So many fuckin' times," John carries on, working Gale up as he rambles. "You don't know how many times I've jacked off, fucked my fingers, thinking of my cock in your mouth that night. Of how it might feel to have yours in mine. So many dolls I've pretended were you. God, Gale, if you had a cunt I'd have ruined you the day we met."

"*God,*" Gale says- is all he can say. It's all too much. The weight of the moment, and the last few years. John's spit and deft fingers on his leaking cock, his filthy mouth, the nagging fear of getting caught any moment. There's a fire in his nervous system, every cell awash with white heat. "John, I'm not gonna last-"

"It's okay," John soothes.

In one swift glide, John tongues the underside of Gale's cock. Gale presses his bloody hand against his teeth. The sensation of John parting his lips against him, taking the tip of Gale's cock into his mouth threatens to send him over the edge embarrassingly fast. He bites the raw cut from the broken bottle, breathing through his nose. John sinks down on him, taking him all in one go. Gale tries not to imagine how many men John has done this to, but he would not put it past him to be a natural. The slick heat of John's mouth on him is intoxicating. Gale's never been in this position before. He wouldn't have asked it of Marge, and if he were truly a believing man he'd say it felt like fate; that John would be his first in both ways.

John pulls off him a little before taking him in again. He whines against his palm, and John's fingers grip his hips hard enough that Gale hopes they bruise. John sucks him with expert pressure, flicking his tongue over the head of his cock and back down, and Gale can feel his release hurtling towards him already.

Then John comes off him completely, and Gale opens his eyes to see him looking up. His lips are pink and shiny, sweat, spit and precum all over his chin. Gale wants it as a photograph. He'd put it in a locket, keep it around his neck and against his chest for the rest of his wretched life.

"Hey," John says, reaching up. He touches Gale's wrist, tugging lightly, pulling Gale's hand away from his mouth. John runs his thumb over the bitten cut, smearing blood across Gale's palm. He shakes his head. "Don't do that. Let it happen."

Gale exhales shakily, and nods. When John looks assured that Gale isn't going to flay himself further, he takes him back between his lips. All the way to the hilt, until John's nose is buried in his pubic hair. Gale can feel his throat relaxing around the length of him, and it's like nothing he's ever felt before. He touches John's neck without thinking, fingers dancing over it like he can feel himself in there. John laughs without pulling off, and the vibrations of it have Gale whining. Without the pain in his hand grounding him, Gale's nearly there.

"Bucky," he warns, ragged and breathy. "Bucky."

John redoubles his efforts, sucking harder, swallowing around him, and Gale grabs the back of his head automatically. He shudders with his whole body, and comes down John's throat. John keeps sucking him, until Gale's oversensitive and half-begging, bent at the middle and pushing John away. He falls back onto his ass, grinning up at him from the dirty ground.

Gale catches his breath. He sticks his hand out to John, pulling him up off the floor. He kisses him again, tasting himself on his tongue. John's moustache is wet with saliva and cum. Gale breaks the kiss, holds John's face back and licks it all off. He feels possessed.

"Took you long enough," John says, and Gale growls, returning to kiss John's mouth and bite his lips with vigour.

He flips them around so that John is against the wall, shoving his hand into John's pants roughly. He's rock hard and sticky, and Gale can't bear to stroke him more than a few times before he drops to his

knees.

“Buck, you don’t have to,” John says, even if his stilted breaths says something else entirely.

“Shush,” Gale says. He shoves John’s slacks and underwear down, and takes his cock into his mouth.

Memories don’t come to Gale with kindness, these days. Always with the shriek of artillery, the taste of sickness and the hardness of frozen ground beneath his feet. The shape of broken metal, burning up around him like the angry cherries of his father’s cigarettes. But now, on the ground and tasting John, salty and sacred, his memories push everything else out of his chest. It’s the start of summer five years ago, and the end of summer five years later. Anything in between is replaced by the sounds John is making above him, as Gale sucks his cock like it’s his last meal.

“Fuck,” John groans, fingers in his hair. “You been practicin’?”

Gale pulls off him, spit hanging between them, but he has to tell John, has to make him know that there’s been no one like him.

“No,” he says, serious as he’s ever been, before taking John back into his mouth.

He’s still messy. He still gags on the sheer size of John, and like that hot night before, he still loves the feeling of choking on him. He doesn’t pull off, feels no apprehension as his jaw begins to ache, savouring the familiar taste until John is pulling at his hair in warning.

“Gonna come,” John grits out.

Gale pulls back just enough to say, “I can take it.”

He swallows every bit of John he has to offer. John comes with a sound he doesn’t even try to muffle, and Gale feels his throat bruise as he thrusts in hard. He comes as deep into Gale as he can without fucking his soul. Gale backs off at the very last second, allowing the end of John’s release to paint his lips and chin just to feel it hot and dripping.

“Fuck,” John breathes. He runs a fingertip through the mess on Gale’s face, popping it into his mouth and licking himself off, looking at Gale with reverence. “Prettiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Gale's heart beats in the hollow of his throat. His jaw goes slack, and he lets John slide his thumb into his mouth. He swipes across the swell of his bottom lip, gathering his own cum and feeding it back onto Gale's taste buds, and Gale eats it dutifully. He holds John's wrist still. Keeps his digit filling the space that would otherwise allow him to speak, so that he can't say anything he could regret. John's thumb strokes across Gale's tongue, pushes back into his mouth, and Gale pulls it further in, licks every trace of John from between the grooves of his fingerprint.

"Hey," John says, voice low. "Let's go home."

Gale looks up at him from beneath his eyelashes. He nods, but doesn't set John's hand free. If he takes John's thumb out his mouth, he might speak. He keeps him still, lets saliva pool around the pressure. It dribbles from the corners of his lips, and only then does Gale move, and only then is it to lap up any part of John he may have missed. He keeps his mouth occupied, and swallows down the words pressing against his teeth.

Gale wakes in John's bed alone. The indent of John's body beside him is still slightly warm to the touch. There is an aching in his jaw, and the little cuts from the shards of glass bottle on the left side of his face sting. The gash in his palm hurts more. Gale looks at it with some combination of disgust and shame. A barely formed scab pulls the skin tight together, but it's clear from the strain of it, and the blood that's spread across his wrist in a half-dried jam, that it will need stitches.

He moves to get out of bed, but as he sits up his breath rushes from his lungs in a sudden jolt. He lies back down. Stares at the ceiling. His heart is beating fast, and he squeezes his eyes shut against every conflicting urge in his body. He wants to find John downstairs. He wants the sheets to eat him whole. He wants to see Marge, and to tell her that he's sorry, and he's thankful, and he's so overwhelmingly scared.

He and John had only slept last night. Gale was going to drive them back, but John had sobered enough to see the curves of the road, and Gale's hands were shaking too much to make sense of the old Ford. Its

gears ground out awful, unhappy sounds at unpredictable intervals. The steering wheel jammed often. He never would have guessed from the way John drives it like it's weightless, but Gale had discovered these quirks the night he'd driven them home before. The night he had stood frozen, and watched John hit himself.

Gale went easy when John put a gentle hand on his hip, pulling him over to face him. There were too many thoughts barrelling through his mind to do anything more than they'd done outside the nightclub, and John had bumped the tips of their noses together, cupped the back of Gale's head, and told him that was okay. Told him to sleep. Gale had blinked, certain that he wouldn't sleep at all, but when he'd opened his eyes it was hours later; the hazy light beyond the bedroom window told him so. John was twitching with a nightmare. Making strange, strained noises that reminded Gale with a sickening gut-punch of what he sounded like as a child, hiding under his bed as if his father wouldn't find him there. He'd pulled John closer to him, tucked his head beneath Gale's chin and played with the curls at the base of his neck. Only when Gale began to stroke his other hand up and down the large expanse of John's trembling back had he settled. They'd followed each other into a dreamless sleep like that, limbs entangled and John's hair tickling Gale's jaw.

Gale feels, this morning, like he did landing in Algeria. He closes his eyes and exhales shakily. The cool breeze through the open window is nothing like the blistering heat through the windshield of a plane, but the sun shining through the curtains stirs the same anticipation either way. Like he shouldn't have made it but he did. Everything will be alright if he just stays in his fort. Putting off counting the dead. No one is hurt, so long as he stays put and does not ask.

He counts to ten, and dresses to go down to the kitchen.

He stops in the bathroom on the way, grabbing a handful of tissues to press to the scab on his palm, dried blood already lifting from the movements of his waking. When he gets to the kitchen John is making coffee. He's facing away from Gale, smoking a cigarette and ashing into the sink. Something feels off immediately.

"Morning," Gale says. He bins the bloodied tissue, gets a mug from a cupboard, slips it next to John's on the counter. "You mind?"

John hums in response. He does not look at Gale. The kettle begins to screech on the stove, and if Gale were being paranoid he'd say John leaves it to holler for a second longer than necessary before pulling it

off and filling the pot. The air in the room feels stifling. Full of smoke, and quiet, and the oppressive sense that Gale has done something wrong, but he can't quite figure out what. Emboldened by the night before, feeling brave and somewhat angry at whatever silent treatment he's receiving, he grabs John's shoulder. He makes him look at him.

"John," he says.

John's face is almost blank. Except his jaw is grinding slightly, brows set heavy, and Gale recognises the look from their days in the war. It's the one John would fix Harding with when he'd been told something he didn't like. Or when a rookie thought his reputation for being a Fun Major meant he was not a Major to be listened to, because lives did depend on it. It's the look he'd given Gale in the camp, when he'd told him he had to be patient.

"Buck," John says after a long moment. He shakes out of Gale's hold, dumping the end of his cigarette in the sink and walking over to the kitchen table. He picks up an envelope. "Got a letter this morning. From Marge."

Gale's heart jumps in his chest. He tries not to let his face twist, can feel the tug of muscles anyway. He clears his throat. "You openin' my mail?"

"Was for me, Buck," John says. He thrusts the offending letter at Gale. Gale turns it over in his unsteady hand, sees Marge's dainty, curving handwriting on the front. It is, indeed, addressed to John C. Egan. He takes a shaky breath. "Go on. Have a read."

Gale looks between John and the letter. John's fixing him with his hardest stare, restrained and unfriendly. He runs his finger over the edge of the envelope, feeling the tears of paper where a letter opener has ripped it. It feels like a loaded gun in Gale's hand. He spares one further glance at John, who is clearly not going to cease his glaring until Gale's read it, and takes the letter out.

Despite it all, he warms slightly at the sight of Marge's cursive. He thinks of all the letters he'd received from her in the stalag; her rosy perfume and the flecks of ink from the nib of her fountain pen the only things that had felt like proof of the outside world. There is no perfume spritzed onto this page. There would not be; the letter isn't for him.

Dear John,

I hope you are well. I hope things are not too hard for you, although I know how hard they have been for Gale. I do hope that you two can find some kind of solace in one another, and that you know how grateful I am for your friendship with him. There is so much I want to say, but it is too much to write just yet.
All I ask is that you encourage Gale to call me. I want to be sure that he is alright after everything.

Sincerely,
Marge.

Gale can't speak. He reads it once, twice, wonders just how much room there is for interpretation, concludes that there is almost none, and he can't speak. He can't bring himself to look back up at John fully. He can see out of the corner of his eye that he's relaxed somewhat, leaning back against a counter and lighting another cigarette. The smoke drifts towards Gale, and makes it almost impossible to breathe.

"So," John says. His tone is level, but Gale can hear the anger coiling in it. "What the hell is this?"

"It's a letter," Gale says dumbly. His own voice sounds miles away.

"I can see that," John says. Gale yearns for a toothpick, gnaws on the inside of his cheek as he finally looks up at him. His mouth is a flat line. "What is she saying?"

Gale has to sit down. He drags a chair out with an agonizing squeal against the floorboards, falling into it heavily. He runs his hands through his hair. "We, uh. We had a conversation."

"A conversation," John repeats. He takes a drag of his cigarette. Gale wishes he'd just say what he's thinking- get this over with quick and painless. "What is this, huh? What're you doing here? Why d'you turn up at my house, asking me to teach you to dance for your wedding, when- is it even happening?"

Gale swallows. His neck feels creaky, stiff like it doesn't want to move at all as he shakes his head. John sighs loudly, dragging a hand over his face. He slams it down on the counter, making Gale jump.

"What's going on? You guys split? Am I a pity fuck? 'Cos I didn't think you were like that, and if you are, well, there's a hell of a lot less risky pity fucks to get out there."

Gale finds it within himself to speak. He has to- he doesn't want John thinking that, even for a second. "No, Bucky. You ain't."

John says nothing, waiting for Gale to continue. He pulls the opposite chair out, as if he's about to sit down, but he changes his mind, toying with the wood of the backrest before pacing the narrow width of the kitchen. Gale's heart is still beating furiously in his ears. He feels dizzy with the lack of oxygen he's managing to draw, like he's up in the thinning atmosphere, with a twenty-thousand foot drop below. John halts his pacing.

"You're gonna have to give me more than that, Gale, 'cos I'm fucking lost."

Gale finds his tongue behind his teeth. He presses it to the point of a canine, biting down hard. "Marge said I was in three relationships," he pushes out. Breathes in. Exhales. "Her, and- and the war."

John waits. Crosses his arms, and stops waiting. "You forget how to count?"

"Bucky."

"No, I'm confused," John points at Gale with his cigarette, ash dropping from the cherry and onto the floor. "'Cos you and me- I thought we didn't lie to each other, Buck. And this is a pretty fuckin' big lie."

"I know," Gale says quietly.

"You couldn't tell your best friend your wedding's off? Your *best man*? You- Jesus Christ- you asked me to teach you to dance. *For* your wedding."

"I know, John."

"You're not a liar, Gale," John says.

"You kissed me."

Gale doesn't know why he says it. The moment he does an awful silence falls. The air in the kitchen stills entirely, like the aftermath of a bomb; like the ugly, yawning space between flak and fighters. It's broken after a minute by John barking out a harsh, humourless laugh.

"I'm not the one getting married," he says.

Something angry flares in Gale's chest. "That's all that matters to you, huh, Bucky? You can do what you want without consequences, you can do whatever you like. And I ain't getting married. Not anymore."

"That's pretty fucking obvious."

"Christ," Gale says, and puts his head in his hands.

This isn't how this was meant to go. Gale doesn't know how it was meant to go, didn't even think it was going to go anywhere at all. He'd been hoping that he could swallow all it was that he felt for John, keep it inside himself forever, live some twisted kind of truth where he at least wasn't stringing Marge along. He'd made peace with being alone. Coming to John's doorstep was a direct contradiction to that; a self-centred and self-mutilating plan, and what's worse is that Marge knew he was going to do it. He hadn't told her where he was going to go. She'd known like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Two people in the world that understood Gale better than he understood himself, and he's hurt them both with his own greed and stupidity.

John does sit down then, leaning back in the rickety chair with his legs spread, breathing deep in and out of his nose. When he speaks next, he's softer. Upset, still, but there's less hurt in his voice.

"Gonna ask you one more time, Buck."

Gale nods, and swallows. He forces the words out, and they burn like vomit.

"Don't feel like myself, Bucky," he says, low and tight. "Don't know how to be, after. She- Marge was so kind, she was patient, but it's like I've come back different, and it wasn't fair on her. I didn't want to put her through that. Through watchin' me like I was gonna snap, not when-" he takes a deep, shuddering breath. Once it starts spilling out, it doesn't stop. "I ain't right for her. She knew, I think. She knows. Think she's known for a long time, and I wanted to do it, Bucky, I wanted to give her all of it. A wedding, kids, a life. But it wouldn't have been right, I- I wanted to love her right, and I tried, but she deserves someone that can without trying. Everything I do takes fucking trying."

He bites the inside of his cheek again, until he tastes blood. John hums in contemplation. Gale's head is still in his hands, and he makes no attempt to move when John speaks after a long, thick pause.

"It's me?"

Gale's eyes sting, and he squeezes them shut against his fingers. His voice comes out rough, hurting like sandpaper in his throat. "Who else?"

"Mm," John says. He makes a sound, sucking air in between his tongue pressed to his teeth. "You coulda told me."

Gale laughs. He takes his face out the safety of his palms. John's looking at him so openly, gaze unwavering, brows drawn together with concern, or pity, and he looks so young. There's a five o'clock shadow dusting his jaw, a light pinkness to the apexes of his cheekbones, lips pressed together solemnly. Gale's breath catches on its way out of his lungs.

"When I went over that wall without you," he says. It's a ten ton weight under his ribs, pulling every inch of him down into the depths of his shame. "You wouldn't have done that."

John sets his jaw, considering. "You had a girl to make it home to."

"I did."

"Shit, Buck," John says. "Why didn't you say something? Did you plan on bullshitting me, or did that just happen? Why did you come here?"

"Just happened," Gale says gruffly. "Just wanted to see you."

"Well, why the hell didn't you just say that?"

"I don't *know*, John," Gale says, desperate, fraying, hands back in his hair and tugging. "'Cos it ain't right. None of this- it- it was meant to be me and you, and I just left you there, and- and I had Marge, and I've not come back right, Bucky. It's all backwards. Jesus. *Fuck*."

"Hey," John says softly. Gale realises he's gasping again, lungs burning and horrid, grating sounds coming out of his mouth. "Gale."

"'M not fit," Gale says. It's thin, quiet and fractured, throat closing up around the words like there's a fist down his neck, dragging them out with force.

"Shit, Buck, me either. You know this."

Gale smiles tightly. It's only half true. He knows the face John makes when he's itching for his flask, can guess what ghosts haunt him like they haunt Gale. He knows what it sounds like when John's dreaming

that he's back there, and what it looks like when he's awake, and trapped inside his own head. But there's still so much Gale does not know. So much that he doesn't think he wants to know, and that he doesn't think John could bear to tell. It could be that way forever. Gale used to know every part of John. There's entirely too much to know, now.

Gale didn't tell John why he was here, because John would have told him, too. He'd never feared that his feelings weren't reciprocated. He had called him pretty first. John was, and remains, as knowable as the text in a book, in that way. But Gale has spent the last year trying to not be a mess. To not be a corpse. Failing miserably in his attempts. That rotting thing inside him that had been festering in the war has become uncontainable, seeping out of his pores and sharpening all of his teeth. Making it hard to eat, to sleep, to think. He could dig it out of his necrotic self and hand it to John, and John would hold it for him, Gale knows this. John has his own rot to hold, though. Like putting two bottle shards back together, parts missing and slitting their fingertips as they try, they wouldn't fit anymore. Gale hadn't thought that they'd fit.

He hasn't felt the ground beneath him since he'd left Europe.

"Just as well," John says. Gale frowns at him, but John is smiling. "You got two left feet, anyways."

Gale laughs, shakes, and lets out some strangled, half-sobbing noise. He takes one of John's cigarettes, and goes through the motions of remembering how to breathe.

Gale goes to the town doctor and gets his hand stitched. Four ugly, black lines pulling his skin closed. Then he sits in the garden for the remainder of the day. John heads back off in the Ford and Gale lets him go, to drive or to think. To drink, possibly. He doesn't ask. Gale sits in the milky late-August sun and reads. He finishes his entire book. Their conversation from earlier weighs heavy on his mind, and when he picks up the book he expects the words to blur together, but he finds them a distraction instead. His head feels clear and empty as he devours the rest of the novel, concentrating harder than he's been

able to in weeks.

He's on the last page when John comes home. He sits down wordlessly next to Gale, slipping his hand into the hand Gale isn't holding the book with, and waits for him to reach the end. Gale rereads the final line six times before he puts it down and looks at John. John's looking up at the clouds, freckles prominent in the evening light. Gale wants to kiss him. He stays perfectly still.

"Needed to think," John offers.

"Mm-hm," Gale says. "Come to any conclusions?"

John smiles. Gale feels stripped raw. Every ruined part of him is laid bare, every bit of hurt and rage and fear. It's all been let loose, sitting between them like a dead friend. Gale wasn't under any illusions that being with John would be easier than being with Marge. It might be worse. Gale has no idea if they'd be able to keep each other afloat, or just drag each other down. There's never been anywhere to hide with John, is the thing.

"Don't have much practice with this, Buck," John says.

"With what?" says Gale, small and croaky.

"Bein' in love," John says. "Making it work."

Gale gapes at him.

John turns to look at him, and his lazy smile breaks into something big and burning, and he laughs. "C'mon. Don't look at me like you were born yesterday."

"It's no good, Bucky," Gale says, voice scraping hoarsely from his throat, head spinning. "I- it's-"

John whacks his arm lightly, grin still plastered on his face. "You, too."

Gale licks his lips, looks up to the sky and tries to gather his thoughts. "John."

"You do."

Gale puts his head between his knees and sighs. His next words are muffled by his legs, and spoken to the ground. "I do. Course I do. But it's not like we can be together, Bucky."

“Why not?”

Gale looks back up at him, and his heart aches.

“The world ain’t that kind,” he says quietly, not all of what he wants to say, and the way John searches his face after he can tell. Gale can tell that John knows what else he’s thinking. *We might tear each other apart.*

John takes Gale’s chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilting his downward stare up to meet his eyes. John smiles again, smaller, hopeful and a little melancholy, and he cocks his head. Shrugs. “Could be alright.”

Gale holds his gaze. He thinks back to cold nights in the camp, John’s body pressed against him for warmth, months of convincing himself that’s all their proximity was for. He thinks of Texas, of meeting John for the first time. Of Marge- kind, knowing Marge, and of his father. Just as knowing, far from kind. Gale’s fingers twitch at his sides. He thinks of waiting for John at that twisted metal fence every day, and how every day he didn’t show Gale was suspended in free fall. A limbo of wishing he could see him again, and that he would not see him there.

Gale was glad when John arrived. Has never forgiven himself for that.

John smells like laundry soap and cigarette smoke, of sweat, and not at all like whisky.

“Don’t count on it,” Gale tries, voice splitting down the centre, and John kisses him.

Gale opens up for John’s tongue without a second’s hesitation. John has one hand at the base of his skull and the other at his jaw, fingertips running over the hinged bone, back and forth. Gale just holds onto the front of John’s shirt like he might lose him if he lets go. John tugs at the hair at the nape of his neck, pulling Gale’s head back, making him hiss against his teeth. The motion makes Gale’s mouth fall further open, and John gets up on his knees to lean over him, kissing him as deep as possible. He doesn’t let go of Gale’s hair. His thumb strokes gently over the shell of his ear as his fist continues to pull, and the combination is so possessive it makes Gale woozy. John breaks away to bite at Gale’s neck. It isn’t hard enough to hurt, not hard enough to break skin, just enough for Gale to moan too loudly into the open air.

John pushes him down onto the warm grass. It's overwhelming. Gale has never been kissed like this before; on his back and overpowered, caged in and panting at John's lips. John straddles his thighs, and Gale bucks up with a choked sound when he feels John's hardening cock against his own. Gale lets him claim his mouth over and over again. His lips tingle with the itch of John's moustache. His stupid lungs are desperate, and he ignores them like they serve no purpose at all. He feels twenty-three again, and a million years old at the same time. He tries to imagine that they're back in Texas, fumbling and not yet scarred, but the years since continue to gnarl in the centre of his chest. His head spins, and he pulls John closer by his collar, trying to find the ceasefire in the heat of his mouth.

They have to breathe eventually. John pulls off him, and Gale embarrassingly chases, lips trying to follow before his brain catches up to what he's doing. John laughs breathlessly, putting his hand on Gale's sternum and pushing him back down. Gale rolls his hips up against John's, testing the waters of his bravery. It makes John gasp, and so Gale does it again.

"*Fuck*."

"Yeah."

The sun is setting behind John's shoulder. Gale wants to see his face in the light again. John drops down a little, face close to Gale's as he brushes sweaty hair from his forehead. For some reason, the tenderness of it makes Gale want to weep. He looks away, trying to hide his face in John's wrist.

"Buck," John says. "What do you want? I'm not gonna do anything you don't want."

"I-" Gale starts.

Doesn't know where to finish. He wants to be a kid in basic again. Fresh-faced and pre-war, his father's belt the worst thing he's had to feel. He wants to rewind time. A small part of him wants to be dead. To have been killed when he got shot down, spared all this sharp fear that has made a home in him.

He doesn't know how to say all of this to John. He knows now, though, that one day he could. One day he might.

"Want you in me, John."

John inhales sharply. “Y’sure?”

Gale’s out of words. He nods.

John gets off him, pulls him up with an outstretched hand, and leads him back into the house. Once inside, it’s like a dam bursts. He kicks the back door shut, and with four walls to muffle their sounds John presses Gale up against the side of the staircase, attacking his mouth with near-manic fervour. He nudges Gale’s legs apart and gets his thigh in between them, using every bit of physical advantage to half push Gale further up the wall. Gale’s weight is held up by the tips of his toes, and the pressure of John’s thigh against his clothed cock. Gale groans, head falling back on the wall as he thrusts forwards, grinding down on the solid muscle of John’s leg.

“Fuck, you’re so perfect, Gale, I gotta touch you,” John says.

“Yeah,” Gale breathes.

John lets him down from where he’s pinned. Gale barely makes it to the couch before John’s hand is on his fly, and then he’s freeing Gale’s cock, hard and leaking already, and he arches off the cushions as John begins to stroke him. He presses his tongue to Gale’s neck, lapping up sweat and kissing the underside of his jaw. A spot there tickles, sends Gale’s eyes rolling back and makes him jump in John’s hand.

“Bucky,” he says, white blooming behind his eyelids. “Please.”

“Say it,” John says.

John is imposing, suspended above him, hand gripping his aching cock. He moves his fist up and down far, far too slowly. He stops altogether after a moment, and Gale makes a noise of complaint, fucking up into John’s fist.

“John,” Gale says, because he will not beg.

John grins down at him. “Magic words.”

Gale glares. “Please.”

“Nuh-uh,” John says. “Magic words. *‘S’* on the end.”

Gale frowns, confused, and then flushes so deeply he can feel his chest turning red. John squeezes his cock and he whimpers. It’s too much to wrap his head around. The enormity of what John wants to hear was

the end of Gale's whole universe just a day ago.

"Y'wanna hear it like this?" he says. "Torturin' it out of me?"

"I'll get it outta you one way or another, doll."

John spits onto the head of Gale's cock, slicking him up, and Gale grunts at the increasing pressure of his grip. He twists his fist just so, and Gale feels a sticky bead of precum slip down his length. John swipes his thumb over the tip, dips his head to give Gale one small lick, and sits back on his haunches, continuing his cruelly slow, tight hand movements.

"Christ, John, God. I love you. Son of a bitch- *God*, I love you, John, please."

It feels like something in Gale's chest has ripped its way out, cracking every rib in the process. The rot creaks, retreats. He wants to sob. He might come.

"That wasn't too hard, was it," John says, taking his hand off Gale's cock and tapping his face lightly. He stands, and something tugs in Gale's chest at the loss of John's weight over his thighs, but John just looks back at him and winks. "Get those off. Get all of it off."

Gale blinks. His heartbeat picks up as he watches John reach into a cupboard, grabbing a tin of Vaseline. He lies back on the couch and shuts his eyes for a moment. Breathes in. Out. Shimmies out of his pants and underwear, pulling his shirts over his head. John reappears in his vision, naked, and Gale wants to touch him so much his wrists ache.

"Y'sure, Buck?"

Gale is barely scared. "Yeah. Now."

"Yessir."

John moves Gale's legs up on the couch and seats himself between them. He runs a touch down the side of his face, over one of his scars, then over his bottom lip. He presses two fingers into Gale's mouth, and Gale sucks at them like they're John's cock, tilting his head back, testing how far he can get them in. He goes until he can taste John's palm, and does not gag.

"Buck," John breathes, awed, pulling his fingers out of his mouth and

slicking them further with Vaseline.

“C’mon,” Gale says, shifting his hips down on the couch impatiently.

“Easy,” John says. His hand dips between Gale’s legs. “You tell me if it hurts.”

Gale nods. He inhales deep, and John presses a finger against his hole. Gale shakes, makes a strangled sound, as John slowly slides his finger in all the way. He’s so gentle with him. Lets him settle into the feeling, and Gale breathes through it as he adjusts. John stokes his cock lazily, Gale shivering lightly the whole time.

“Good?”

Gale nods. Moves his hips forward a little and sighs. John pulls back out, then pushes in, working Gale on one finger until he’s panting beneath him. John slips another into him, and the stretch stings. Subsides. John bends his fingers, and the slick drag of him pulling out and pressing back in begins to draw moaning breaths from Gale. The whole thing is agonizingly slow. It’s clear that John doesn’t want to hurt him, but the ache of it sends shivers up Gale’s spine, and tight heat builds in his gut. John adds a third finger, and Gale chokes.

He starts to fuck himself on John’s hand. Grinds down onto him, then moves up into the grip on his cock. John’s leaning back, watching where they’re connected. It’s embarrassing. Gale has never felt so exposed. Something about it makes his toes curl.

John crooks his fingers inside him again, and Gale’s brain short-circuits.

“*Shit*,” he gasps.

John beams, looking tender and vaguely smug, as if he’s just won a puppy. “Yeah?”

“That’s-” Gale chokes out, but he has no further coherent thoughts.

John does it again, brushing over something in Gale that has him feeling drunk. He does it again, and Gale’s mouth falls open, heart pounding, scuffling further up the couch. He’s scared he might come just from this.

“You ready?” John says.

“Uh-huh,” Gale says, entire body thrumming.

“Be easier in a bed.” John slides his fingers out.

“Here.” Gale doesn’t mean to sound so short with him.

John laughs. “Alright, darlin’.”

The pet name goes straight to Gale’s cock. He lifts his legs up higher, shifts his hips closer to John, and watches with his mouth watering as John gets more Vaseline. He slicks himself up, thrusting into his fist for a moment. He groans, neck craned back, and Gale stares at the curve of his Adam’s apple and the vast expanse of his chest.

“John,” he says. “Please.”

John drops his head back down to look at Gale. He smiles at him. Kisses him deep, sweet and slow, and puts his hands on Gale’s hips. He pulls him closer, lining himself up, and presses the head of his cock into Gale’s body.

The stretch is more than three of John’s fingers. It tingles in the backs of Gale’s knees, burns at the base of his spine. John’s shaking with the effort of holding back. Gale catches his breath and reaches up to touch his face.

“’S’alright, John,” he says. “I’m alright.”

John still doesn’t move for a long moment. He looks as if he’s studying Gale’s face, searching for a lie, and Gale is momentarily crushed by the idea that he may have broken John’s trust. He lets his legs fall open further, to the point where it hurts in his hips, getting his hand around the back of John’s neck and tugging.

“Come on.”

John does. He falls forward into Gale, slow as possible, and Gale feels like he’s going to burn up as he feels the full length of John fill him. All the air goes from his lungs. John pants above him, arms trembling, biting his lip. He stops, catching his breath, before pulling out a little and thrusting back in. Gale moans, loud and unguarded.

“Shit, Buck. God. I’m staying here forever.”

Gale is coming undone. The longer John hovers above him, the more his whole body itches with the need to take his cock further in. He

almost laughs. Does laugh a little- thinks, haltingly, *if his dad knew,* but he quickly shakes the thought from his brain. It's an irrational, untethered thing. A rebounding of grief, of relief, the smoggy haze of years gnawing into him where he did not know it could ever be like this. That he would ever have this.

"Bucky," Gale gasps, pulling John down to kiss him.

The angle changes, and John's cock hits that spot inside Gale that his fingers were working over. Gale groans against John's lips.

"Fuck, Gale," John says, low and rumbling.

He pulls back again, fucking into him with more determination, but Gale can tell he's still going easy on him. He wraps his legs around John's waist, dragging him further into the tight heat of him. He urges him on with a heel to the small of his back, *harder*. Grinds his hips down against John's, feels his cock slide out of him a couple of inches before fucking back in. Gale's own cock drags between them, sticky and trapped by their bodies as John pushes into Gale deeper. Deeper. Gale chokes on a moan.

John pulls nearly all the way out, getting his hands around Gale's waist and hoisting him until he's almost in his lap, thrusting back into him with such depth and force that Gale thinks he's died for a brief second. John keeps his hands on him, gripping tightly. The change of position means that Gale's cock isn't trapped anymore, and he reaches down to touch himself before John bats his fingers away. He wraps his own hand around Gale, fucking back into him at that same angle, and Gale makes a sound he's barely sure is human.

"This where all your volume goes, huh?" John says, breathless as he speeds up. "Quiet thing, I thought, when we met. *God*- you just need a good fuck, then you're loud as bells." Gale hides his face behind his forearm. John takes his hand off his cock, pulling his arm back down. "Wanna hear you. Y'sound so pretty, Buck."

As if to drive his point home, John pivots his hips forward, taking a hold of Gale's cock again and wrenching a stuttering moan from his throat. Gale's barely comprehending what John's been saying. He's so close, so wound tight with the size of John and the size of his own need. The sounds of John thrusting in and out of him, the sound of John's fist moving over his leaking cock- it's nothing he's dared to imagine. A perfect landing barely comes close.

"John," he warns. "I'm gonna come."

“Fuck, me too,” John says. “Can I come in you?”

Gale nods frantically, can’t think of anything in the world he wants more than that. John bends down to kiss the side of his neck, hand moving faster over his cock, and then he hits that part inside Gale again and his world lights up around him. He comes harder than he ever has, painting John’s fist and both of their stomachs. John keeps fucking into him, thrusts growing erratic. Gale’s delirious. He feels like he’s flying as John keeps hitting that spot, oversensitive and cock-drunk, until finally John captures his lips. The kiss is barely a kiss. Open-mouthed, wet and desperate. John moans loudly into it as he comes inside him.

John’s arms give after a moment’s suspension. He drops down to Gale’s level. Breathes heavily into the crook of his neck, absentminded tired fingers playing with the edges of Gale’s hair. He mumbles something incoherent, and Gale just about manages to drag back his own senses to ask him what it was.

“I love you,” John repeats lazily into Gale’s collarbone.

It throws Gale off-kilter. The words come so easily to John, and he wonders how long he’s had them prepared, sitting just under his tongue, waiting for him. Feeling in his chest swells to the point of hurting. Every inch of his body is hot and sticky, cum drying in the hair on his stomach and slipping out from around John still rooted between his thighs. He pushes John back by his shoulders so that he can look at him.

“I love you, too,” Gale says. He feels heavy with it. It feels foreign in his mouth. Something flighty. Something he’s held caged inside him for too long, and now it’s an effort to push out each time, but he tries. He’ll keep trying. It eases with each utterance, like memorising a prayer. “I love you,” he says again. Wants to keep saying it forever, and at the same time doesn’t want it to lose any meaning. He knows that’s not how it works, though. If the only words he ever said for the rest of his life were those, it wouldn’t be enough to get across how true they are. He takes a deep breath, finds it comes easier than expected. “Think we’ll make it to a bed sometime?”

John smiles down at him. He looks sleepy. Spent, and beautiful. He kisses the scars on Gale’s cheeks, and Gale fights off a flinch at the gesture. No hiding with John. No more trying to, he pledges to himself. No more damn trying to.

“Yes,” John promises him. “We got all the time in the world.”

He pulls out of Gale, making no efforts to clean either of them up. Instead, he drops his head to Gale’s chest, their impractically large bodies curling around each other on the cramped couch. His fingers run up and down the ladder of Gale’s ribs. He’s so warm. Touching the bare skin of John’s back, Gale would have thought he’d never known winter in another life.

“Still can’t dance,” John says against his chest.

Gale throws his head back and laughs.

“Can still teach me,” he says. “Got all the time in the world.”

End Notes

thank u for reading this was a labour of love and many glasses of white wine.
song title from this track.

yours truly, Not A Historian Just Horny x
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